

FREE54: GRASSROOTS ORGANISING FOR PUBLIC SPACE IN BRUSSELS

Free54, a collective based in Brussels, emerged in 2015 in response to changes to the public square Place St. Catherine. As a grassroots initiative, Free54 aim to reclaim the square as a truly public space, accessible and functional for all. The group advocate for inclusivity, resisting commercial encroachments, and highlight the social needs public spaces fulfil. While their efforts have sparked discussions and awareness, tangible changes have been limited, underscoring systemic barriers and the complexity of urban development.



FEANTSA: Can you start by introducing Free54, its origins and aims?

Free54: So So Free54 was created in 2015. I was still in high school, near Place St. Catherine. Place St. Catherine is a very popular city centre located square. It was a daily use square. It always had a commercial side, with shops and restaurants, but locally managed and an important part of the daily lives of citizens.

Then when we were around 16 or 17 years old, in the last years of high school, we started feeling little interventions. First, benches that were taken away, and the possibility for trucks to ride on the square to install event equipment. The public toilet was removed at one point. Then with more active repression banning drinking or playing football because it was bothering the [restaurant and bar] terraces, which were taking up more and more space on the square.

There was a chainification of shops and restaurants, and the contact with these businesses changed. You can talk in a very easy way with somebody who has an emotional link to the square and who's been living there too. It's a different conversation you have than with somebody who doesn't. [For chains] there isn't a relationship to the locality except for it being economically interesting.

Our frustration over losing public space inspired us to form Free54 to reclaim the square. We saw how this was a local representation of the general development and mindset of the city. The story of St. Catherine is like the story of so many other squares in Brussels.

We started asking for concrete things back and thinking about what kind of public spaces we wanted, and what kind of public space is there now. It was about reappropriating the square, reusing it, and finding ways to show what public space is and what it could be. Going back to the core definition of public space, where everybody can define it in terms of their needs.

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We must acknowledge that for some people public space is an extension of their home, and for others it even is their home. Public spaces are the only space where some people can live. Like us [Free54 collective] – we were a more privileged group, it was about being able to exist and experience the city, without being in a relationship of consumption with it.

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We held a lot of actions on the square, lobbied, and campaigns trying to talk about the issue. Unfortunately, we haven't seen much concrete effect yet. Our latest action was to build a lot of benches on the square and host a debate with politicians on the topic, but we didn't receive any solid promise at the event or after.

Bringing the benches was a symbol to say 'It's not that difficult, if a little citizen collective can do this and install new benches, then why can you not do it? After nine years of negotiation, you being the public service of the city.'

FEANTSA: *So, you haven't seen any positive effects? Why do you think that is?*

Free54: I think it's a system. We are a little organisation, in a very powerful economic system where you don't have enough leverage to fight it. I think we put things on the card, have a conversation, and give things a little bit of attention. But globally, I don't believe that it's through a conversation with politicians that you're going to get anything done. I think like you said, some rules are being made for very privileged people, and that exclude a lot of people within the use of public space, and you need to decide for yourself if you want to follow them or not.

FEANTSA: *Have you seen any changes since the development of Free54?*

Free54: I think COVID gave the possibility for broadening terraces because we couldn't sit inside. Terraces could get very easy permits, and you see that a lot were not retracted after COVID-19. I think this was a very decisive very important time within the evolution of privatisation in public space in general. I don't think there are any steps that we made in the opposite direction.

FEANTSA: Not even in how people are thinking about public spaces?

Free54: Probably. Of course, we had the opportunity to talk about this and a lot of people agree with our view on this. But you have also people who have normalised the commercialisation of big space and the gentrification of the city centre, including the “cleaning” of people and behaviours perceived as problematic. They are not aware of alternative ways of using and reclaiming public space, partly because the current solution aligns with their individual interests. A major part of the problem is the lack of examples and a collective imagination for shared spaces.

I feel like a lot of local citizens have always been behind Free54, it's been a very popular movement with a lot of support, but I don't know if the balance is high enough in comparison to people who are thinking about their own interests.

FEANTSA: So you as an organisation have any ideas for the future? What could, result in change and what is it that we need as a city?

Free54: It's about vision. It's about the definitions and the limits you put into the use of a certain space, and I think you need very clear politics for this to change. If you have very clear politics, then you can think of a friendly design and you can consider what different categories of people need from public space.

But if it's not public, you cannot even think of how you can implement all those needs.

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FEANTSA: *Do you have any examples of spaces either in Brussels or beyond, where there's been a positive use or change of public space?*

Free54: No. I do think some squares and projects are being protected a bit, or where there is a vision a bit more interesting like where we are now [Parc Ovest, Brussels], or the development of Maire Moskow in St. Gilles. I think it's also important to think about what makes a good quality public space. And I think it's a lot about human contact. We realise it's not always about design, but design helps with ownership. Think about how can you make sure a space, a given space, creates a feeling by the people using it that it's also for them and that they can make something out of it and take care of it and nurture it.

If the funding behind every policeman that does a round in that public space to control that people are not using the space, not sleeping where they shouldn't be sleeping, would instead be invested in a social worker being present and offering a welcoming possibility to the space it would make a big difference.

FEANTSA: *When people talk about cities the issue of security comes up quite often. We often see how this is used as an excuse to criminalise and target people experiencing homelessness. I'm wondering how you think narrative plays into the issue of public space?*

Free54: I think that a safe space for someone is not a safe space for somebody else. I think you can have safer spaces, but safe spaces can only exist in a very specific time frame with conditions for a very specific group that enables this group to be in a safe position, but the space will never be totally safe. I don't think at any point it's cameras or police presence that will make a space more safe. It's more underlying respect and social checks of collectiveness that will make a space safe.

FEANTSA: *Do you have any recommendations for people who want to create a collective like Free54?*

Free54: Free54 started with an Instagram page and a Facebook page. We said, 'Okay, every Friday after work or school, we will meet on the square, and everybody brings what they want to do in public places.' And people came – with their families, to eat cookies, for kids to play. People came to jam and make music and meet in the public space. Like we always used to do, but on a bigger scale. Maybe in the beginning there will be nobody that's there, but it works. For example, in Marseille they do it at La Plaine, they take a big picnic blanket and invite people to bring food, and they eat all together on the square.

I think you do little things that bring people together in public spaces. The important thing is that it is regular. You need to do it a lot. You need to be every week at the square. And it's more of a daily fight, I think, than a very massive one-shot thing.

FEANTSA: *I'm wondering if there are any points you'd like to finish with?*

Free54: I don't want to sound pessimistic. I think it's very important to keep on going. Having local actions concerning those spaces and I think the best people that can talk about it are people that know the space and that really want to defend it, you know. I think if everybody would do the same as Free54 for their local square it could be very impactful and change policy at some point, but it needs to be on a bigger scale.